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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1839
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 1834
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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN: KABIRI'S IRPT TAKES A "TIME OUT"

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1. (SBU) SUMMARY: During an hour-long introductory call with the Ambassador September 26, Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) leader Muhiddin Kabiri described his party's reasoning for not participating in the upcoming presidential elections. Kabiri said the party would use the next three years to increase party strength and "build trust from domestic society and the international community" in preparation for the 2009 parliamentary elections - "the government will no longer be able to play the Islamic fear card against us then." Kabiri made a plea for increased educational exchanges and help improving the level of English among the party's young people - "otherwise they go to Russia." End Summary.

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Internal and External Factors Behind the "Time Out" Decision

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2. (SBU) Kabiri listed several domestic reasons for the party's September 25 decision not to participate in the presidential elections. First, there is no proper legal basis for the elections. Perhaps more importantly, Rahmonov's forces have created a political environment where society believes there is no real alternative to him. The "monopolist" press has already been conducting a pro-Rahmonov campaign for two or three years; it is impossible to conduct a campaign in a matter of months. "You could battle Rahmonov as a person, as a politician - but not his administrative resources." Kabiri described a belief that exists both in Tajikistan and sometimes abroad that the active political participation of an Islamic party is ironically a threat to democratization - the ruling party argues that should the IRPT gain power, it will set Tajikistan on the same course as Afghanistan under the Taliban, or at least be "bad for the investment environment." The IRPT has found it difficult to get out its message that it is not extremist, but

rather stands for fair government that reflects the common "values of civilization and humanity" and not just Islamic values.

13. (SBU) Kabiri also described challenges posed by the external environment. When the U.S. began its fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan, the party took a difficult decision - to support the U.S. battle against terrorism even against "believing Muslims." The party's support of the U.S. position had cost it some of its electorate. The war in Iraq compounded this problem, as had Western reaction to the election of Hamas in Palestine. "Our people say that when an Islamic party was democratically elected, it created a rift with the West, and caused problems not just for the government, but for the people of Palestine." Kabiri's media statements that his party decided not to participate in the election so as "not to create a confrontational situation" grow in part from this perception.

14. (SBU) "There will not be a true contest," Kabiri predicted. When we participate in elections, he added, we want to participate in a true competition. To participate at this juncture would "play with the feelings of the electorate."

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Election Conduct and Next Steps

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15. (SBU) Kabiri said his party would like to observe the voting process, and would like to have one of its members participate in the Election Commission (Note: Parliament Speaker and Dushanbe Mayor Ubaidulloyev had told Ambassador earlier that day that only parties fielding a candidate would be allowed to observe the elections at polling places. The Mayor is probably incorrect. The Central Committee on Elections and

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Referenda already having approved IRPT representatives at polling stations even prior to its decision not to field a candidate. The CCER's Deputy Chairman Muhibullo Dodojonov has already told international organizations that the government has changed the decree to permit all political parties to send in observers regardless of whether or not they have fielded a candidate.) Kabiri said he doubted the presidential election would be substantially better than the last parliamentary elections. Following the election, which Kabiri described as a "Time Out" for his party, the IPRT will focus its efforts on "building up trust in society" and "strengthening the party" for participation in parliamentary elections three years hence. He said the environment then would be different - "they will no longer be able to play the fear-of-Islamists card against us." The IPRT would not be substantially changing its strategies or tactics, "but every generation has its own view."

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Separating the IRPT from Extremists

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16. (SBU) Kabiri pointed out the difference between what he called "extremist" groups such as the IMU, which use violence to achieve political goals, and "radical" groups such as Hizb Ut-Tahrir (HT), which do not. "I'm not a supporter of HT," he said, "but we shouldn't be imprisoning people for having radical ideas if they're not acting on them with violence." When you put young people in jail for 8-10 years because of political ideology, they're already "lost" and more disposed to become extremists, even terrorists. The official position of the IRPT is that HT's ideas are utopian and against the national interest of an independent and sovereign Tajikistan.

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Request for More Exchanges

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17. (SBU) As in every official meeting the Ambassador has had since her arrival, Kabiri asked for more educational exchange opportunities for Tajik students, especially those from the IRPT. Many of his staff have been to the United States. "They always return with a greater appreciation for the U.S. because of the respect they see for Muslims there." He lamented that so far no IRPT members had been selected for educational exchange programs, "although I know the selection is fair and transparent, and you cannot establish some kind of IRPT quota." (Note: Vohidkhon Qisiddinov, Head of Administration for the IRPT was selected for USAID's Community Connections exchange program in the United States October 6-25.) He thought perhaps the level of English language was not sufficient to compete successfully, "so many of our students go to Russia." Kabiri himself, who regularly travels abroad, including several visits to lecture at Columbia University, has again been invited for a three week trip this fall to the United States. "It's tough for a political leader to be away for such a long time, and it's also a political question - some of our members think I already spend too much time in the West."

18. (SBU) Comment: While sharing the view of other opposition parties who have opted out of the election (septel) that there will not be a level playing field for candidates, Kabiri clearly believes that the political dynamic in the country will evolve over time to permit more electoral freedom. Although Rahmonov's People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan will hold onto power, the tools it has used to do so thus far (fear of instability, assertions that an Islamic party would send Tajikistan back to the dark ages) will be increasingly less effective as time goes by and the devastating civil war recedes from the political

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consciousness.

19. (SBU) We are struck by the constant request for more educational exchanges in the United States - including from some less expected sources such as the leader of the Islamic party and Parliament Speaker, largely believed to be in Moscow's pocket. It is clear to us that the emerging political generation, no longer overwhelmed by memories of the dark days of the 1990s, is looking for a touchstone - if not in the United States, they'll find it in Russia or Iran. To truly promote democratic political development in the only country in Central Asia to have a legal Islamic party, we need to dramatically increase our exchanges, and find new ways to boost the level of English language throughout the country - Peace Corps could play a positive role in this regard. End Comment.
JACOBSON